

The Canadian  
Heritage  
Rivers  
System



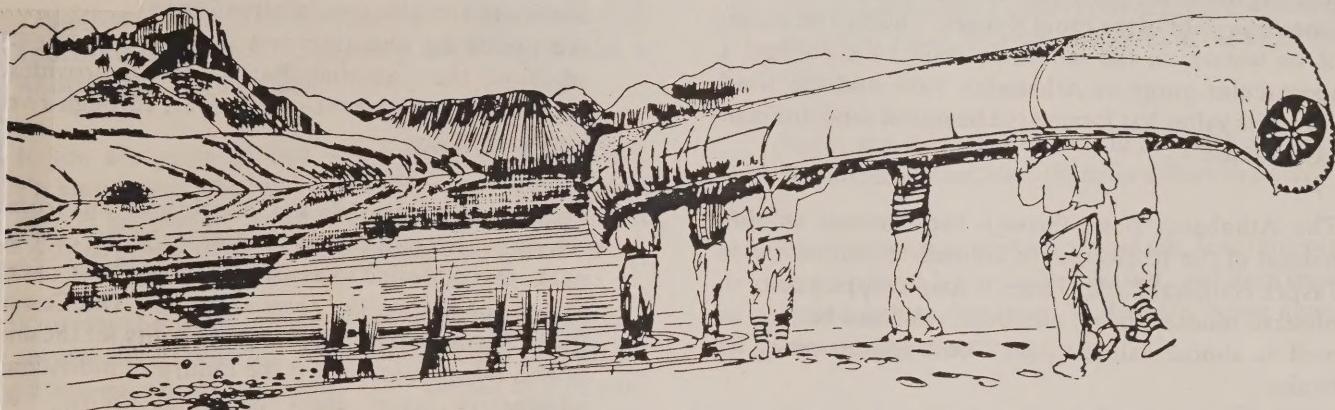
Jasper National Park  
Heritage Communications

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EP 210

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# The Athabasca River Touring Guide

Jasper National Park

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The Athabasca River originates in Jasper National Park as meltwater from the Columbia Icefield. Flowing north to Lake Athabasca, its waters eventually empty into the Arctic Ocean via the Mackenzie River. It is a beautiful river, arising in the massive quartzitic sandstones of the Rocky Mountain Main Ranges and washing out of the park through the dramatically tilted limestone slabs of the Front Ranges. The erosive action of its waters on the mountain rock have created a spectacular gorge at Athabasca Falls and the wind across its valley has formed the beautiful sand dunes of Jasper Lake.

The Athabasca flows through the choicest wildlife habitat of the 10,878 square kilometres that comprise Jasper National Park. There is ample opportunity to observe moose, sheep, elk, bear, wolf and beaver, as well as almost half the park's bird species along its banks.

The river became part of a major fur trade route over the Rockies after David Thompson crossed the Athabasca Pass in 1811. From that time on, the Athabasca Valley has been an important transportation corridor for travel by foot, rail and automobile.

Recreational opportunities along the river range from novice to expert whitewater paddling, and river touring offers outstanding potential for natural heritage appreciation, and shoreline hiking, camping and picnicking in one of Canada's outstanding natural environments.

The stature of this river's ecology, physiography, history, and recreation is reflected in its designation, within the national park, as a Canadian Heritage River. Included in the Canadian Heritage Rivers System in 1989, this section of the Athabasca is managed by the Canadian Parks Service according to the System's objectives. The natural and historical features for which it was nominated receive special attention to ensure that they are preserved and interpreted to park visitors. In addition, the Canadian Parks Service provides for recreational enjoyment of the river, through river or highway touring.

This guide covers 145 km, starting 64 km from the river's source and ending at Hinton, 36 km east of the park. It is intended to assist in planning your river trip and to take along the river with you. The Canadian Parks Service cannot take responsibility for the misuse of this information or for the failure of individuals to adequately assess their paddling ability. River conditions may change considerably with water levels. The decision to run this river, or any reach or rapid, rests solely with the individual. We hope this guide helps you to enjoy this river.

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\*See back page for more information on the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

## National Park Regulations and Important Information

Safety Registration is not required but you may wish to fill out a registration form anyway. Register at either of the park's two Information Centres during working hours. Call 852-6177. Remember that your registration must be returned at the end of the trip.

**Transport Canada** requires that you have one approved life jacket per paddler, a bailing device, a whistle and a spare paddle.

If you are going to fish you need a **National Park Fishing Permit**. Either a full season or seven day pass can be purchased at park information centres, local sporting goods stores, or from campground attendants.

You may camp in designated campsites only. There are several along the route. A **Park Use Permit** is required to use primitive campsites. The permit is free and available at the Icefield and Jasper Townsite Information Centres during working hours. The Athabasca Island and Brûlé sites are primitive campsites with pit privies, fire boxes and some wood. There are restrictions on the size of river parties allowed at these primitive campsites. Consult the Jasper Townsite Information Centre trail office if you have a large group or are travelling in peak season.

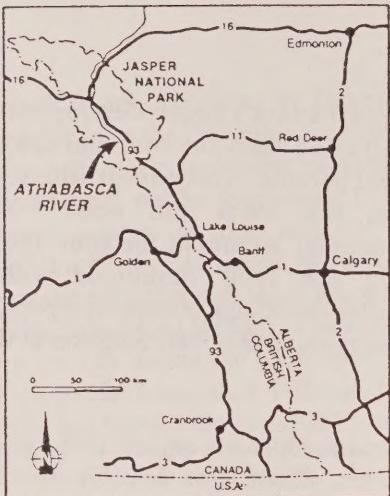
Some of the park's larger, developed campgrounds are also situated along the river and can be used en-route without permits. Kerkeslin provides outhouses, picnic tables, fire boxes and wood. Pay the roving campground attendant for your site. Wabasso and Wapiti are both developed campgrounds with washroom buildings, interpretive programs and several nice sites along the river. Register at the kiosk for your site.

**Natural and historic objects** in the park are protected resources. Please leave them for others to enjoy.

River water may contain glacial silt, fecal streptococci or giardia so it should be filtered, and then treated or boiled before drinking. To be safe, bring along your own drinking water.

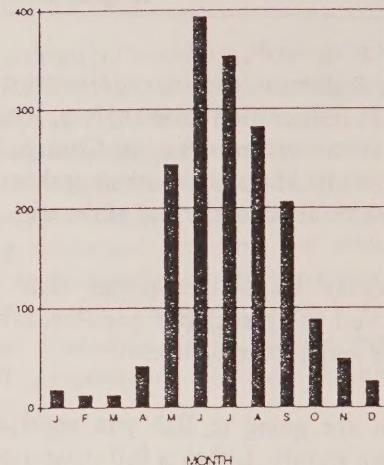
If serious problems arise and assistance is required call the Warden Service (852-6157) or the RCMP (852-4848). There are warden stations along the route at Athabasca Falls, Edith Cavell, Sixth Bridge, Maligne River and Pocahontas.

## Regional Map

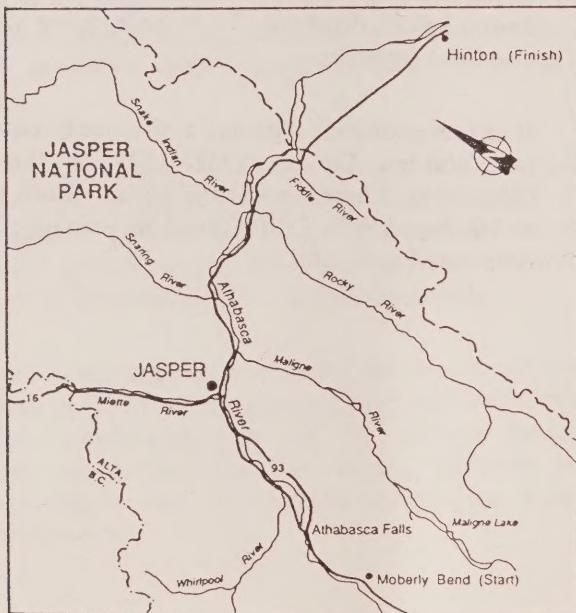


## ATHABASCA RIVER (Near Jasper)

Maximum Daily Discharge - 1979 to 1985



## Athabasca River in Jasper National Park



## National Topographic Maps

- Athabasca Falls (83 C\12)
- Medicine Lake (83 C\13)
- Jasper (83 D\16)
- Snaring (83 E\1)
- Miette (83 F\4)
- Entrance (83 F\5)

## River Hydrology

The best time for paddling is in June, July and August. Shallow sections and mid-channel obstructions generally appear upstream of Jasper townsite by early September. Downstream from Jasper townsite along the upstream ends of Jasper and Brûlé Lakes sand bars can create navigational problems.

## Rating River Difficulty

River difficulty is rated using the six-part International River Classification System. Individual rapids ratings are called classes, while sections are called grades. The rating system for rapids follows. The rating scale for river sections is based on the same difficulty levels, but is always indicated in Arabic numerals. Where two ratings are indicated for a specific rapid, the first rating applies to high water conditions and the second to medium-low water.

### Class I - VERY EASY

- Suitable for novices in all boats.
- Waves small and regular. Passages clear with occasional channel bars and artificial difficulties such as bridge piers.



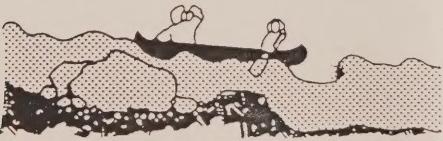
### Class II - EASY

- Suitable for intermediate open canoe, novice closed canoe or white water boat with intermediate accompaniment.
- Rapids of medium difficulty, with clear and wide passages. Low ledges, sweepers, snags, log jams and large protruding boulders may be present. Open canoes may ship some water.



### Class III - MEDIUM DIFFICULTY

- Suitable for advanced paddlers in open canoes and intermediate paddlers in white water and closed boats.
- Waves numerous, high and irregular rocks, eddies and rapids with clear and narrow passages requiring precise manoeuvring. Inspection usually needed. Upper limit for open canoes, although extended reaches at this level are not recommended.



### Class IV - DIFFICULT

- Suitable for advanced paddlers in closed canoes and white water boats. Not suitable for open canoes.
- Long rapids with powerful and irregular waves. Narrow passages through rocks and boiling eddies, requiring precise manoeuvring. Course difficult to reconnoitre from the water. Inspection mandatory.



### Class V - VERY DIFFICULT

- Suitable for expert white water paddlers only.
- Extremely difficult, long and very violent rapids following each other almost without interruption. Channel bed is extremely obstructed. Big drops, steep gradient and violent current. Inspection essential but may be difficult due to nature of the terrain.



### Class VI - EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT

- Suitable for teams of expert white water paddlers, at favourable water levels and with adequate provision for rescue.
- Difficulties of Class V carried to extremes of navigability. Nearly impossible and very dangerous.



## River Description

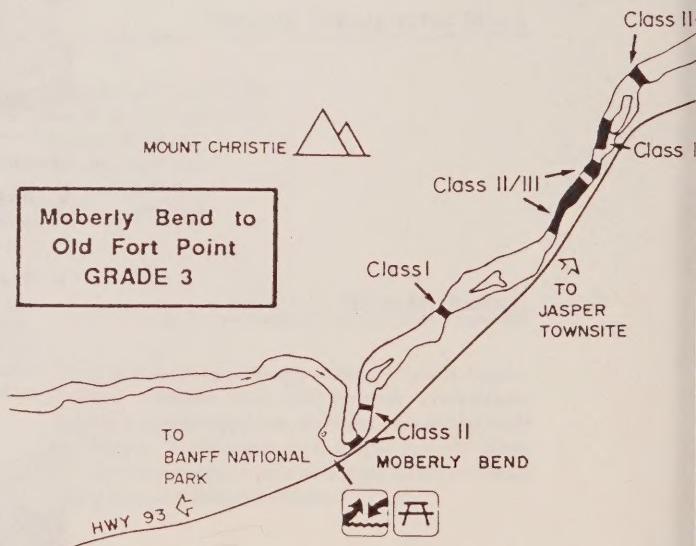
The Athabasca offers a variety of paddling experiences within two distinct sections.

The 51 km upstream of Jasper townsite is best suited to white water craft. This section is rated Grade 3 overall and contains frequent Class III rapids. Two Class II ledges occur below Athabasca Falls. The mean river gradient along this section is 3.8 metres per kilometre.

Athabasca Falls, 30 km south of Jasper townsite and 26.5 km from Moberly Bend, is a mandatory portage of almost 2 km. Many white water paddlers run the sections above and below the falls separately to avoid the portage. Treat the falls with respect for they have claimed several lives.

The 58 km downstream of Jasper townsite is decidedly calmer. The mean gradient is only .8 metres per kilometre and there are no rapids. It is well suited to open canoes and novice or intermediate paddlers. The main concerns are gravel bars, sweepers and wind. From the mouth of the Snaring River east, strong winds can develop seemingly independent of what the weather is doing elsewhere. The results of the wind are seen in the beautiful sand-dunes along Jasper and Brûlé Lakes.

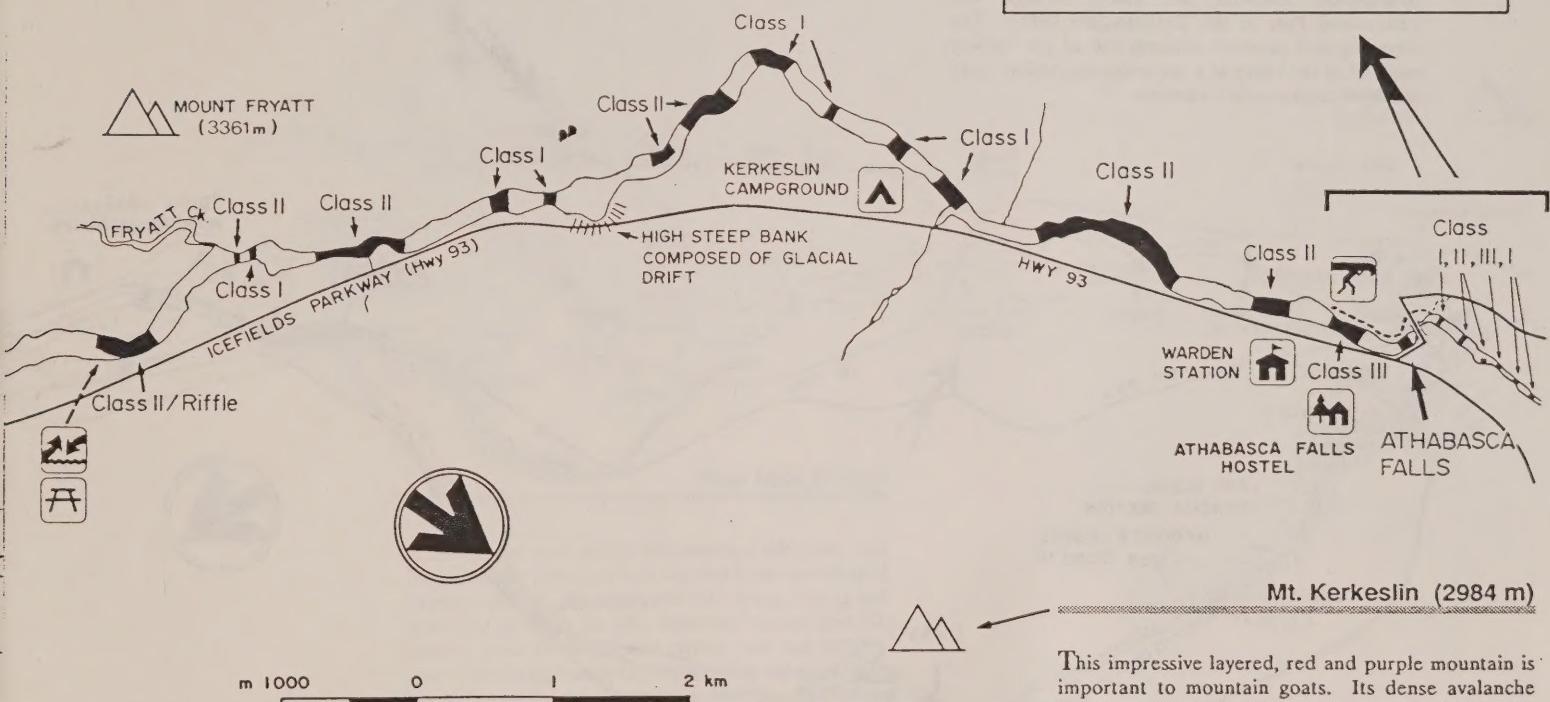
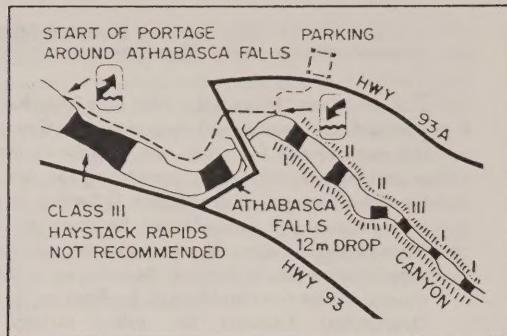
	Rapids
	Put in/Take out
	Portage
	Warden station
	Developed campground
	Primitive campground
	Picnic area
	Hostel
	Mountain peak



## Athabasca Falls

**Portaging It:** The 2 km portage starts above Haystack Rapids. Looking downstream the portage trail is on the right. The portage trailhead is not signed.

**Launching Below:** The section below the falls is particularly scenic. To launch below the falls, park on the west side of Highway 93A at the Geraldine Lake trailhead. Then carry your boat along the signed trail a short distance to the river.



Mt. Kerkeslin (2984 m)

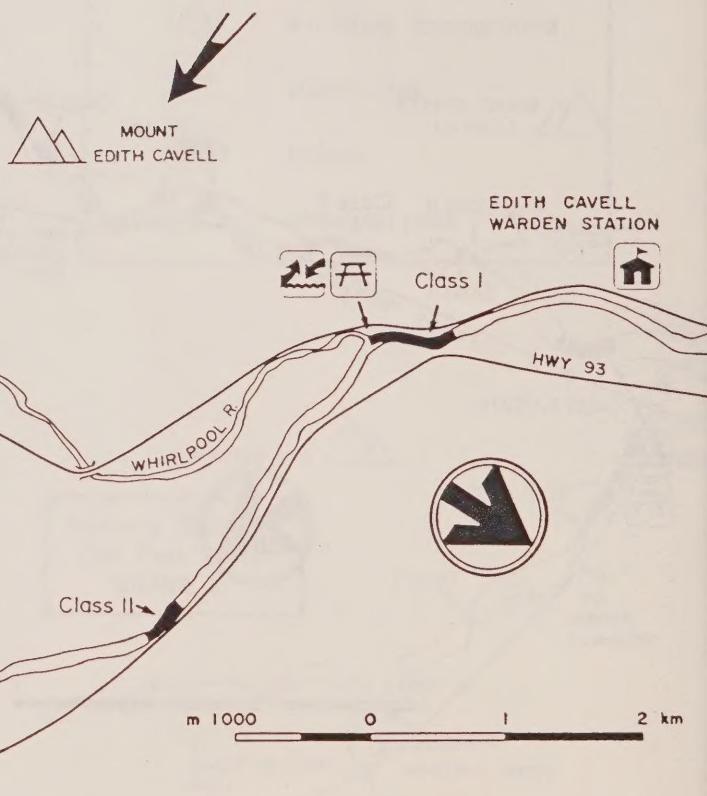
This impressive layered, red and purple mountain is important to mountain goats. Its dense avalanche slopes provide them with winter forage, the whitish cliffs along the river yield important minerals and its many ledges are the perfect place for nannies to give birth. If you are paddling in late May or early June, watch for the nannies carefully spaced along the ledges.

## Human History

For more than 200 years the Athabasca River has been part of the transportation history of western Canada. In the days of the fur trade, the Athabasca was an important part of a route connecting the east with fur-rich resources of the British Columbia interior. Henry House and Jasper House, fur company supply bases, were built along the river's shores to support the supply route that eventually became an important transportation corridor through the Rockies. In 1862, Overlanders followed the valley through the Yellowhead Pass to the Cariboo gold fields. The surveying and eventual construction of the railway established the valley as a major transportation route still significant to today's travellers.

## Mount Edith Cavell (3363 m)

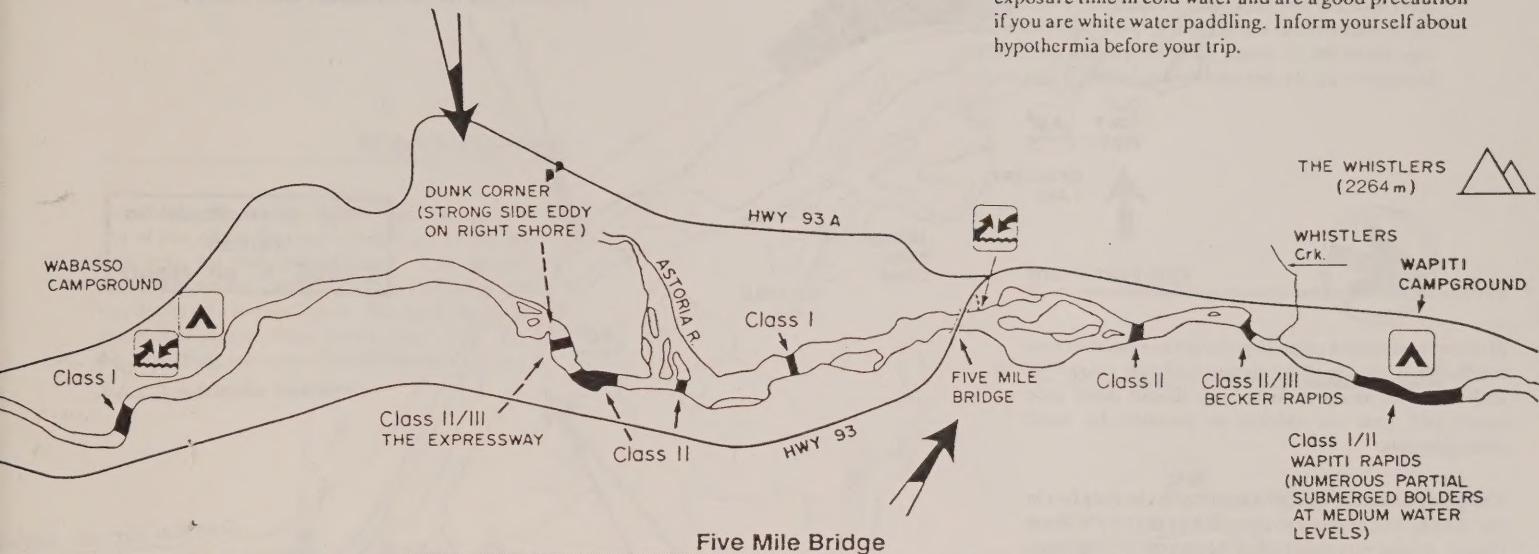
Mount Edith Cavell was called White Ghost by the Indians and Montagne de La Grande Traverse by the fur traders because it marked the turnoff to Athabasca Pass. In 1916, the mountain was renamed for Edith Cavell, a heroic British nurse who was executed by the Germans during World War I for assisting Allied soldiers to escape.



## Dunk Corner

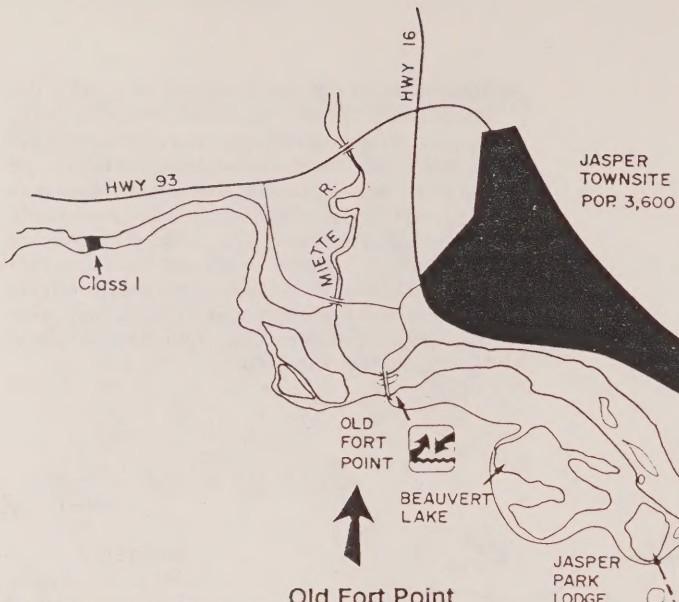
The channel at this point is restricted on the east side by a low rock outcrop, running perpendicular to the river, and on the left by outwash material from the Astoria River. A strong side eddy and whirlpool lie immediately downstream from the projecting point. These hazards can be safely avoided by following the left shore, but stay alert to the tricky currents.

Hypothermia is a distinct possibility if you fall in this glacial river. The water is seldom above 10°C in the summer. Prolonged immersion can cause lowering of the body core temperature. Even after rescue, the victim can continue to cool into unconsciousness and death. Heat must be provided by an external source such as a campfire, warm fluids (not alcohol) or another person's body. Simply covering the victim cannot replace body heat. Wet suits significantly increase exposure time in cold water and are a good precaution if you are white water paddling. Inform yourself about hypothermia before your trip.



## Five Mile Bridge

You are now well within the montane life zone, that mosaic of low elevation habitats that is the mainstay of Jasper's wildlife. Here are critical calving, rutting and wintering grounds for elk, important spring and fall feeding areas for black and grizzly bear and reliable winter hunting grounds for wolves. The montane zone is precious in Jasper. It makes up less than 10% of the park but is also the area most utilised by people. Activities in this crowded corridor affect park animals over a wide area.

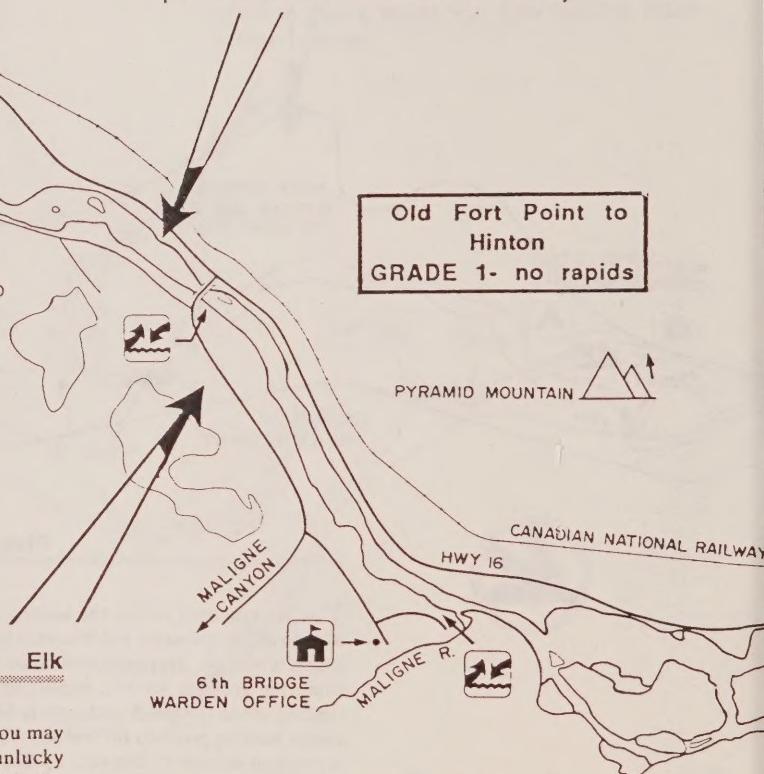


If you are putting in or pulling out here remember that the beach is also used by commercial raft tours. As traffic can be heavy at times, you should move your boats and gear as quickly as possible to avoid entanglements.

The point's name is a bit of a mystery as the only fort in the vicinity was erected to the north in 1811 by William Henry. It was very short lived, however. The original name may actually have been Old Ford Point because of signal fires built to guide the fur brigades to good fords nearby.

If you are paddling in late May or early June, you may be lucky enough to see a newborn elk calf or unlucky enough to be pursued by its mother. Perhaps it is the growing recreational pressure on calving areas that has caused the increase in aggressive elk vs. people incidents. Whatever the reason, give cow elk a wide berth in spring.

A Douglas fir tree, now long dead, with all but the top branches removed is located on the left (north-west) bank of the river. The lobstick was a common route marker during the fur trade. This one was used by Walter Moberly in 1872 to indicate a meeting place to Sir Sandford Fleming when Fleming was investigating a possible route for the Canadian Pacific Railway.



## Fishing

Bull, brook and rainbow trout live throughout the Athabasca. Mountain whitefish are caught downstream from Athabasca Falls. Lake whitefish and northern pike are caught downstream from Jasper townsite and in some backwaters. Fishing is only fair although conditions improve in the fall when the river clears.

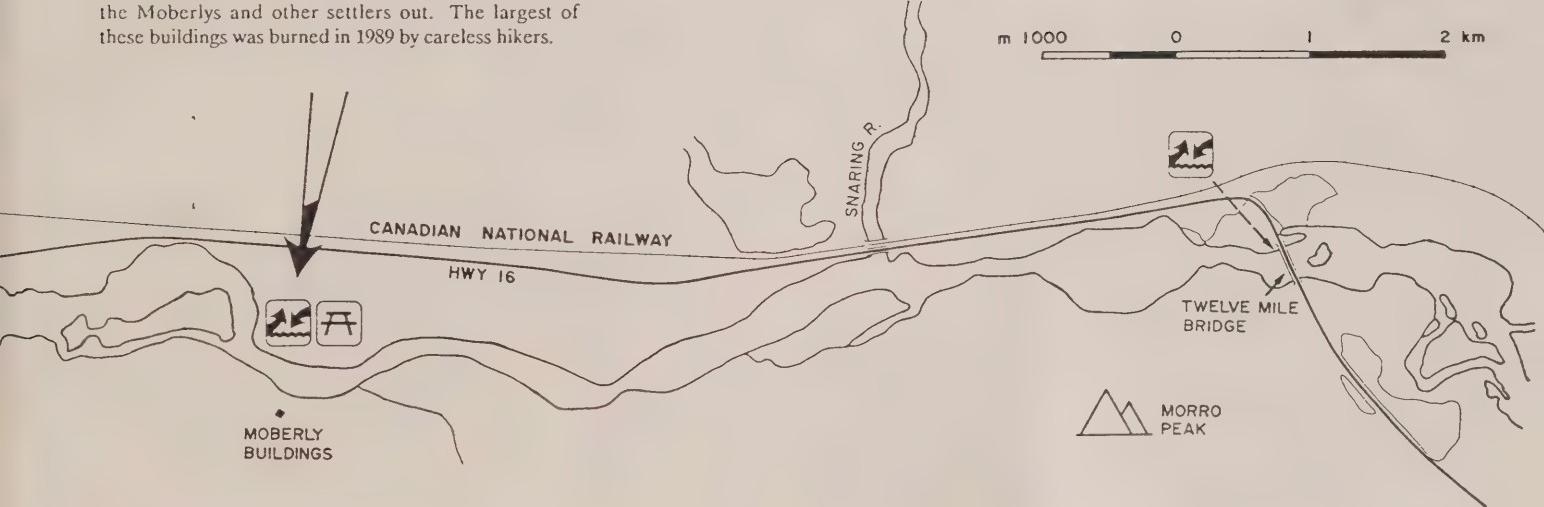
## Sand and Wind

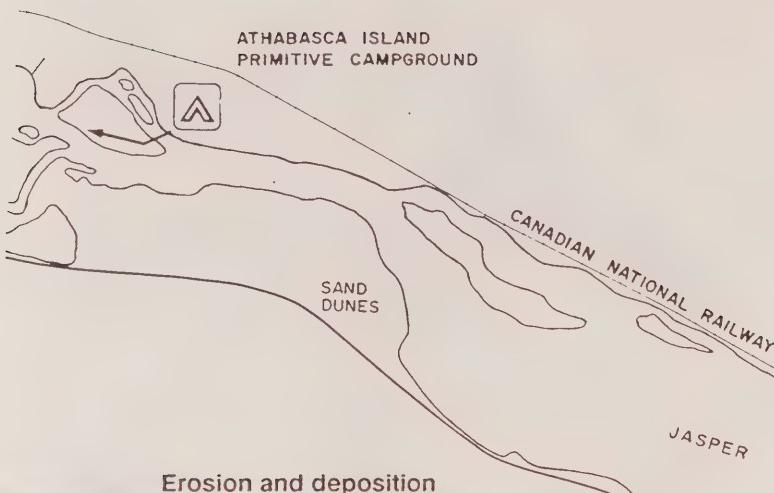
Wind is characteristic of this part of the valley. You may curse it as you paddle against it but the wind helps the bighorn sheep who live here. It blows their winter pastures free of snow and keeps their escape terrain accessible.

The wind has also formed the sand dunes along the shorelines of the islands and the east end of either lake. This sand originated on the bed of a lake formed as the great valley glaciers receded about 10,000 years ago. Jasper and Brûlé lakes are remnants of this proglacial lake.

## Moberly Buildings

John Moberly constructed these buildings in 1898. The son of one of the first fur factors in the area, he lived here with his wife and children. The sequence of settlement was broken however, in 1907 when the area was declared a national park. The government bought the Moberlys and other settlers out. The largest of these buildings was burned in 1989 by careless hikers.





### Erosion and deposition

Over the past 100 million years the Athabasca River has eroded this great valley. In some places, rushing water from the Athabasca or its tributaries has worn down the mountain rock to form spectacular gorges and falls like those at Maligne Canyon, Fiddle Canyon and Athabasca Falls. Glacial silt, sand and debris washed down by mountain streams is deposited as alluvial fans spreading into the Athabasca at the mouth of the Astoria and Snaring Rivers and accumulates in flat stretches to form the branching river patterns seen downstream of the townsite.

Of all the rivers piercing the mountain barrier, the Athabasca was the most frequently used in the fur trade. Brigades left Fort Edmonton paddling up the Pembina and then the Athabasca to Old Fort Point. They then restaged, crossing the river by horse in summer and dogsled in winter, and continued up the Whirlpool River, over Athabasca Pass and down onto the Columbia River. The route was active from 1811, when David Thompson first crossed Athabasca Pass, to 1846 when the Hudson's Bay Company withdrew from the mouth of the Columbia. Built in 1813, the supply depot of Jasper House was central to this era. It was finally abandoned in 1884. Unless you are a seasoned archaeologist, there is now little left to see at this site.

### VIEW UP THE BROAD SNAKE INDIAN RIVER VALLEY



### Vegetation Zones

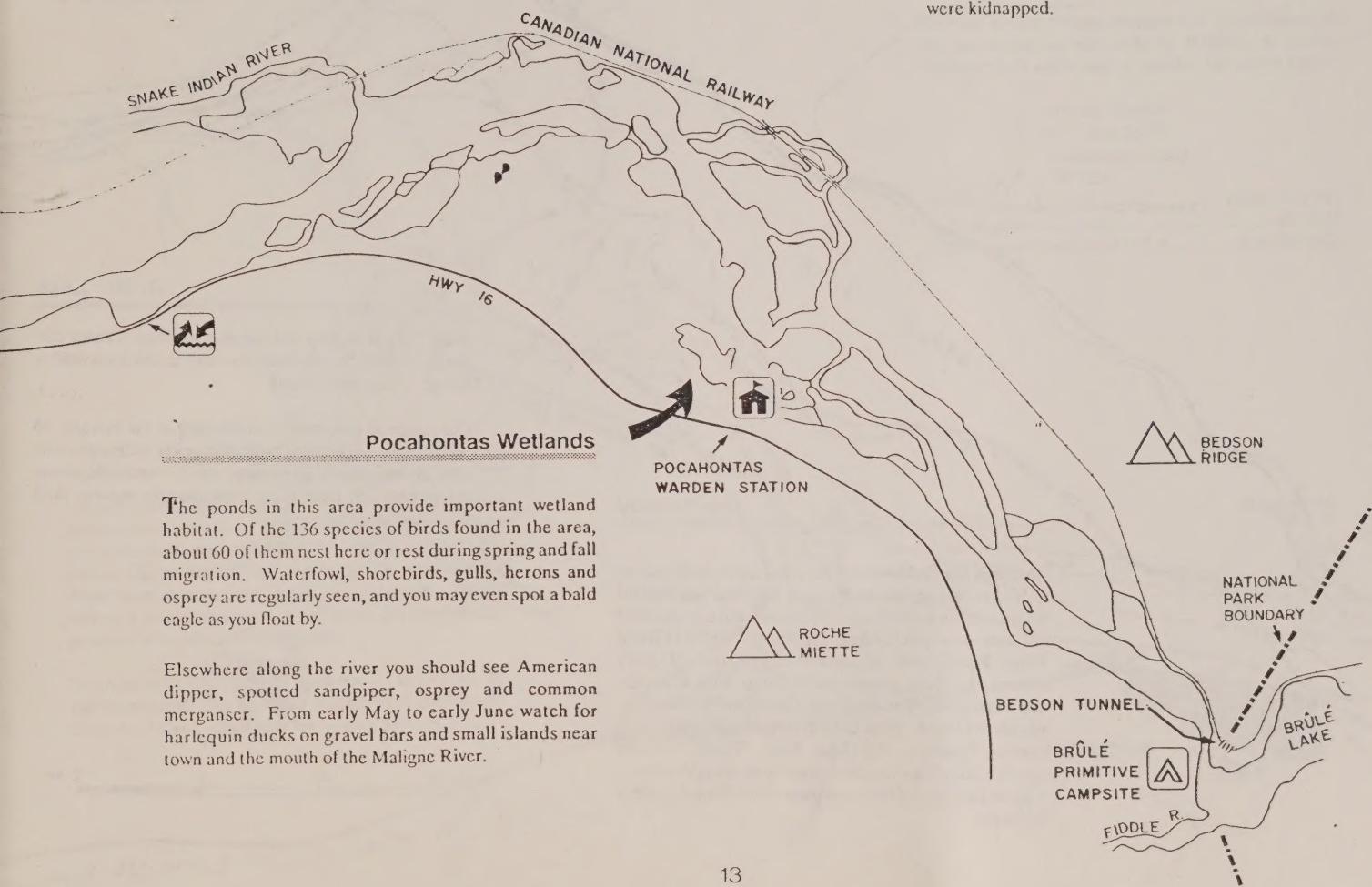
### Jasper Lake

As you leave the Athabasca Island primitive campsite, stay to the left along the railway tracks to find the channel. Paddle behind the two sand islands and then to where the track makes a sharp bend. The shifting main channel, obscured by glacial murk and often whitecaps, will be somewhere between here and the far shore. If necessary, you can walk but you may wish to wear wet suit boots for this as the water is very cold.

If coping with Jasper Lake is not taking all your attention, pause to note the zones of balsam poplar, rose and spruce creeping up the dunes on the south side. Each species stabilizes the dune to a greater degree until the shifting sands are stopped and a stable spruce forest and juniper grassland is secured at the top.

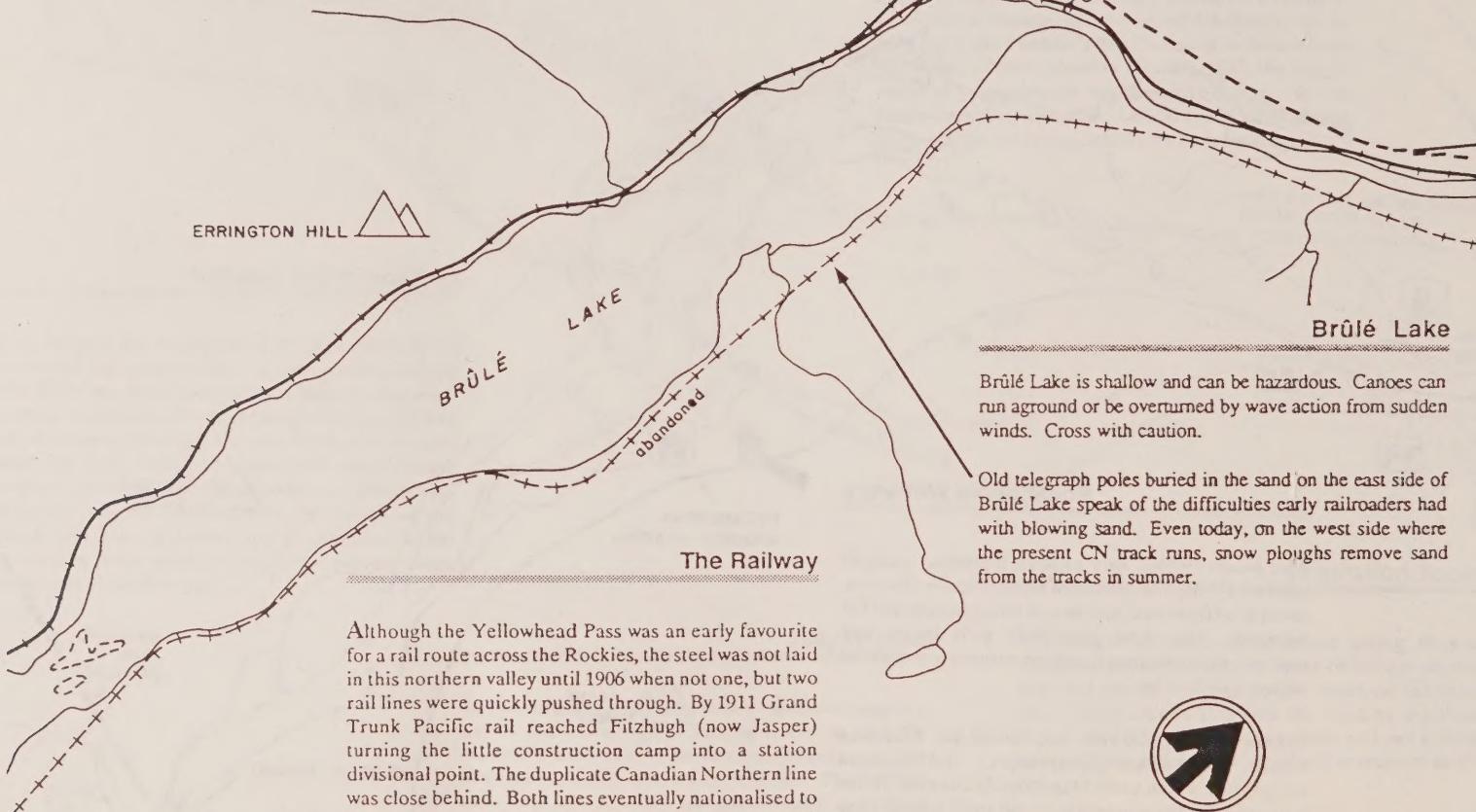
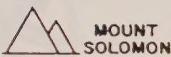
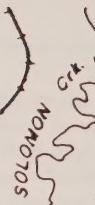
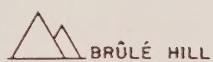


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## Good-bye

You have now left Jasper National Park. We hope you enjoyed your visit and learned a little about one of Canada's great rivers. Information on camping, canoeing or fishing outside Jasper National Park is available from Alberta Tourism

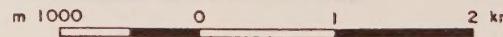


### The Railway

Although the Yellowhead Pass was an early favourite for a rail route across the Rockies, the steel was not laid in this northern valley until 1906 when not one, but two rail lines were quickly pushed through. By 1911 Grand Trunk Pacific rail reached Fitzhugh (now Jasper) turning the little construction camp into a station divisional point. The duplicate Canadian Northern line was close behind. Both lines eventually nationalised to become Canadian Northern Rail. Today CN still operates its main transcontinental line through Jasper. Almost a quarter of the town owes its livelihood directly to the rails.

Brûlé Lake is shallow and can be hazardous. Canoes can run aground or be overturned by wave action from sudden winds. Cross with caution.

Old telegraph poles buried in the sand on the east side of Brûlé Lake speak of the difficulties early railroaders had with blowing sand. Even today, on the west side where the present CN track runs, snow ploughs remove sand from the tracks in summer.

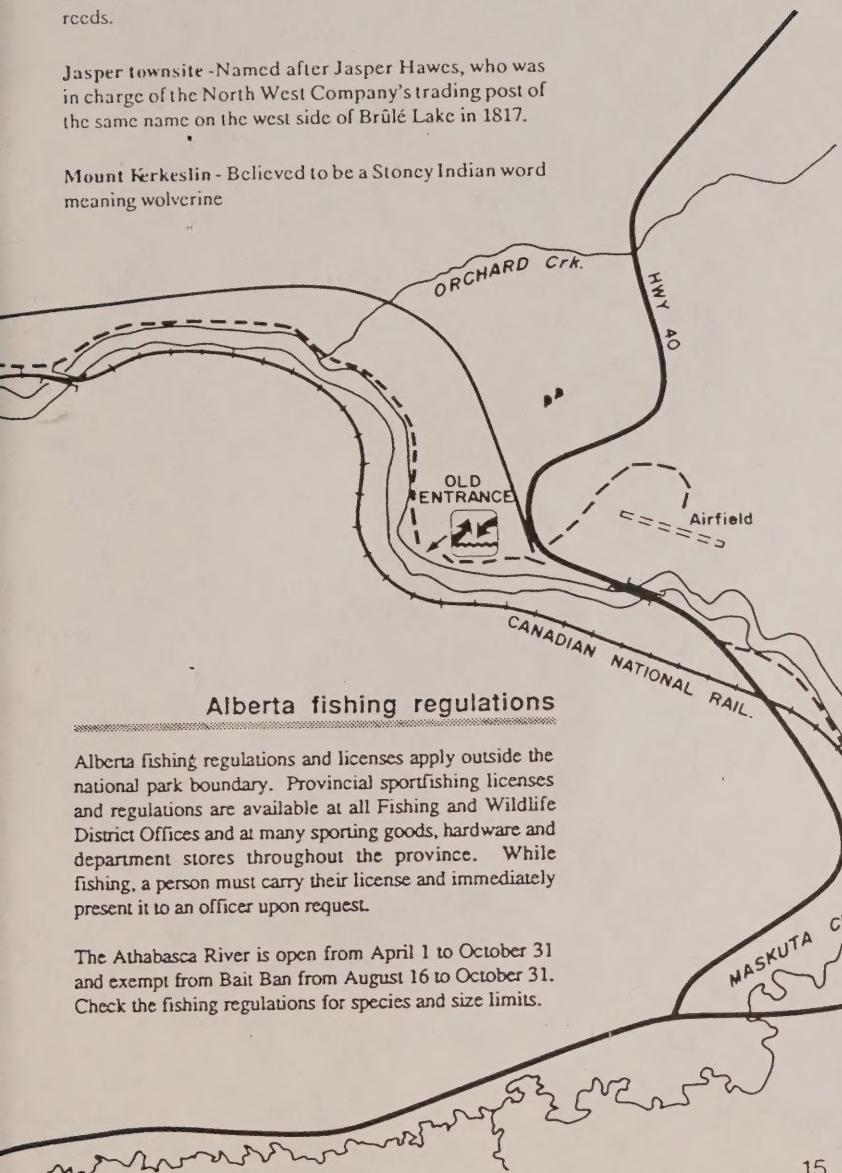


## What's in a name

Athabasca River - Cree word meaning where there are reeds.

Jasper townsite - Named after Jasper Hawes, who was in charge of the North West Company's trading post of the same name on the west side of Brûlé Lake in 1817.

Mount Kerkeslin - Believed to be a Stoney Indian word meaning wolverine



## Alberta fishing regulations

Alberta fishing regulations and licenses apply outside the national park boundary. Provincial sportfishing licenses and regulations are available at all Fishing and Wildlife District Offices and at many sporting goods, hardware and department stores throughout the province. While fishing, a person must carry their license and immediately present it to an officer upon request.

The Athabasca River is open from April 1 to October 31 and exempt from Bait Ban from August 16 to October 31. Check the fishing regulations for species and size limits.

## Camping outside the park

There are no campgrounds along the river between Jasper National Park and Hinton, but random primitive camping is allowed. Fires are permitted unless the fire hazard is high and a campfire ban is in effect.

There are several private campgrounds in the Hinton area and provincial campgrounds in William A. Switzer Provincial Park north-west of Hinton. For details contact:

Alberta Tourism  
P.O. Box 2500  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5J 2Z4

In Alberta.....1-800-222-6501  
In Edmonton.....427-4321  
Canada and Continental U.S.A.....1-800-661-8888

## CANADIAN HERITAGE RIVERS SYSTEM

The Canadian Heritage Rivers System (CHRS) was established in 1984 to give national recognition to the important rivers of Canada. It is a cooperative program between the federal and provincial/territorial governments to conserve the features and heritage values of significant rivers.

Each government participates on the Canadian Heritage Rivers Board to review nominations and oversee the System. For a river to be included in the system it must be of outstanding significance in one or more areas: human history, natural history or recreational value. The river must also be managed to protect and enhance its heritage resources for the benefit and enjoyment of future Canadians.

As of June 1992, twenty-two rivers, or sections of rivers, had been included in the Canadian Heritage Rivers System, in all provinces and territories except Prince Edward Island. Five of these rivers, including the Athabasca, are located in our national parks. The other four are:

South Nahanni River, Nahanni National Park Reserve  
North Saskatchewan River, Banff National Park  
Kicking Horse River, Yoho National Park  
Alsek River, Kluane National Park Reserve

The total length of the rivers included in the System is 4,500 kilometres, of which nearly half is located in provincial or national parks. Since its creation in 1984, the program has become the fastest growing river conservation program in the world.

If you would like more information on the CHRS or on rivers included in the System, please contact:

Secretary  
Canadian Heritage Rivers Board  
c/o Canadian Parks Service  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0H3



Published by authority of  
the Minister of the Environment  
© Minister of Supply and  
Services Canada 1992  
ISBN 0-662-19846-8  
Cat. No. R63-191/1992 E

Canada